



# Homeland vs. Our Land

# Conflicting Identities in Crimea

# Nathaniel Ray Pickett

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**Nathaniel Ray Pickett**, during the Spring 2011 semester, worked as a Graduate Research Assistant in a collaboration program between the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies (CREES), University of Kansas and the U.S. Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) at Fort Leavenworth. The intent of this program is for select students to learn more about Eurasian security and military operational environment analysis and discover how open source foreign language materials are used in developing informative research products. This analysis does not necessarily reflect the views of FMSO.

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## **Introduction by Ray Finch, FMSO**

*Since time immemorial different groups of people have been fighting over the same piece of land. As one empire expanded and another contracted, the victors, the defeated, and the survivors have squabbled over who was the rightful owner of the contested territory. Despite tremendous technological advances in being able to accurately delineate borders, in many corners of the planet, the question as to which country actually owns a given piece of property remains unresolved. The issue of uncertain ownership certainly applies to the territory known as Crimea.*

*Depending on one's starting point (or the source), Crimea rightfully belongs to the ethnic Tatars (who occupied the region before the Ottoman empire moved in during the 15th century), the Russians (who took it from the Ottomans in the 18th century) or the Ukrainians (who ended up with this valuable peninsula in the 20th century). All have rightful claims and considerable evidence to 'prove' that this territory belongs to them. These claims reached a fever pitch shortly after the USSR collapsed in 1991, when the majority Russian population claimed ownership, and there have been frequent predictions since then that Crimea would become the next 'flash-point.'*

*In this brief historical paper, Nathaniel Ray Pickett examines some of the reasons why conflict has not occurred. He reviews the various claims to ownership and some of the ethnic, political, religious and economic issues which both aggravate and ameliorate this situation. His analysis, particularly his exposition on the question of 'ethnic identity,' serves as a firm foundation for understanding the complexity of sovereignty over this truly beautiful piece of property.*

# Homeland vs. Our Land:

## Conflicting Identities in Crimea

By *Nathaniel Ray Pickett*

The Crimean peninsula is many things to many people. It is a homeland, a premier vacation destination, a key strategic location, an integral part of independent Ukraine, jewel in the crown of the Russian Empire, a site of ethnic cleansing, a major battlefield, and a monument of multiethnic harmony, to name only a few. Today, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (ARC) is the only administrative region of Ukraine with an ethnic Russian majority and a sizable non-Slavic indigenous minority (roughly 12% of the population)—the Crimean Tatars. Throughout its history Crimea has always retained a special status, a separate identity comprised of many other identities. Paradoxically, both its specialness and separateness have been the source of and the means of avoiding conflict. Even today we see both of these forces at work in Crimea.

This “identity conflict” is more historical anomaly than long-standing tradition. Most of Crimean history is that of a multiethnic, multireligious land. As a premier commercial and military locale, Crimea had been populated by Greeks, Genoese, Ottomans, Tatars, Russians, Armenians, Jews, and others. Competing historiographies of the past century, however—especially those of the Soviets and Crimean Tatars—have created a narrative of the past that overlooks these other groups, transforming the Crimean peninsula into a (potential) hotbed of interethnic conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Following the collapse of the USSR, Western political scientists predicted that Crimea would be the primary source of conflict between newly-independent Ukraine and Russia.<sup>2</sup> As the Crimean Tatars returned from forced exile, interethnic disputes on the peninsula became and continues to be not only a real possibility but also the primary source of potential conflict. However, major conflict has not yet erupted, even as Ukraine prepares to celebrate its twentieth anniversary in August 2012. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the potential for conflict

1 Sasse, chapter 3.

2 Sasse, 2.



**Swallow's Nest**, one of the romantic castles of Neo-Gothic style near Yalta, Crimea; built in 1912 by the order of a German baron Stengel according to a project of a Russian architect A. Sherwood. The Swallow's Nest is a popular tourist destination in Crimea. © VascoPlanet.com <http://www.vascoplanet.com/>

has evaporated, or even greatly diminished. Although negotiations between the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars, the overwhelmingly Russian Crimean government in Simferopol, and the Ukrainian government in Kyiv continue to maintain a tenuous peace, there are still real and pressing issues that threaten conflict between these groups. Unless the issues of these groups are addressed, the tenuous peace in Crimea may be shattered and quickly deteriorate into conflict and violence. Because the historiographical narratives of the Crimean Tatars and the Crimean Russians have polarized their groups against each other, it is up to the Ukrainian central government in Kyiv to mediate a compromise.

## CRIMEAN IDENTITIES

As stated above, the historically complex ethnic structure of Crimea has been glossed over in favor of two national groups: Crimean Russians and Crimean Tatars. There is no doubt that both of these groups have occupied the Crimean peninsula. With modernity, however, came the modern notion of the nation, what Benedict Anderson terms, “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>3</sup> Imagined and constructed as they are, the boundaries of nations harden with time and the rewriting of the past.

This leads to the present situation in Crimea: two nations—the Crimean Tatars and the Crimean Russians—occupy the same space from which, to varying degrees, their national identity is drawn. As each new authority moved in (or out, in the case of the Crimean Tatars), the new legends, images, and symbols of Crimea were only placed on top of the previous layer—sometimes synthesizing, sometimes aiming to supplant—resulting in the present-day situation of conflicting place identities. In a large measure, this binary only developed in the Soviet period as a result of competing historiographies, which in turn have forged these national identities.

Before delving into the history between these two nations, how this national binary developed and what has come out of that construction, it is necessary to investigate the origins of these national identities.

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, 6.



Map of Crimea by Aaron Perez. Map derived from planiglobe.com vector images [CC-BY-SA 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/>)]

***...to Crimean Russians the peninsula is both “our land” and “homeland.”***

## **Crimean Russians**

Emma Widdis writes that in its origins, “Russia was a space fought for and contested.”<sup>4</sup> This definition underscores the imperial ambition of Russia, as is evident in the expansionist policies of Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great, the Bolsheviks, and Stalin. What became Russia, therefore, was “won” space: to the victor go the spoils. However, with space sometimes came people, who became de facto Russian. This two-forked view of Russian national identity began with Peter the Great and was best put forth by Pushkin. In his 1835 travelogue, Pushkin described “Russia” as a multinational empire but he also commented on the newly-conquered Caucasus as foreign, exotic, and oriental, thus differentiating the people of the south as part of a nation not ethno-culturally homogenous to what he considered “Russian.”<sup>5</sup> The distinction between “us” and “them,” the sharp contrast between what is Russian and what is foreign, was and continues to be strong in Russian national identity.<sup>6</sup>

Crimean Russians share much with the greater Russian national character, the only major difference being a designation of space. The designation as “Crimean” sets this group apart from Russians just across the 4.5-km Kerch Strait. The Minorities at Risk project uses the term “Crimean Russian” to separate this group out from other ethnic Russians in Ukraine, where Russians constituted 17.3% of the population in 2001. In Crimea, however, the ethnic Russians make up the majority of the population (58.3% in 2001),<sup>7</sup> the only region in Ukraine where Russians hold the majority. In addition, Gwedolyn Sasse, author of *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict*, argues that Crimea holds a special place in the myth of Russia, and, as such, the term has both political and cultural meaning.

Sasse, in fact, writes at length of the place of Crimea in the Russian national myth. She states that “the myth of Crimea in the Russian imagination began as an imperial exotica with the journey of Empress Catherine II in March 1787.... Catherine was taken with the climate and beauty of the peninsula, and she recognized both its commercial potential and its geopolitical role in further confrontations with the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>8</sup> The Crimean Riviera was heavily developed and drew comparison to the Côte d’Azur. As mentioned above, it was a favorite spot of Pushkin and of many other authors, including Chekhov, who died there while battling tuberculosis. Crimea was a romantic place for Russians, and that continued well through the Soviet period and beyond. Because of its exalted place in the Russian national identity, very soon after its annexation Russians relocated to the peninsula and established concentrated settlements where they developed a deep sense of homeland. In this regard, and because of the Russian and Soviet historiographies of Crimea (largely in the case of the latter to erase the Crimean Tatars from Crimean history),<sup>9</sup> to Crimean Russians the peninsula is both “our land” and “homeland.”

4 Franklin and Widdis, 35.

5 Franklin and Widdis, 55.

6 Franklin and Widdis, chapters 4 and 5.

7 Ukrainian Census, 2001.

8 Sasse, 40-1.

9 Sasse, 68-69.



A Crimean Tartar named Ahmet (age 77), who watches over the community mosque, sits at home in a field of temporary housing on land occupied by returning Crimean Tartars, outside of Simferopol, Ukraine, Oct. 6, 2008. © Ilkur Gurer/WpN via digitaljournalist.org

## Crimean Tatars

The Crimean Tatars have called Crimea home for centuries. Following the demise of the Golden Horde, the Crimean Tatars established the Crimean Khanate. The Crimean Tatars were sovereign rulers of the peninsula and the surrounding steppes until the Ottoman Empire annexed the Khanate. However, even as a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire from the 15th to 18th centuries, Crimea enjoyed a high level of autonomy. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea there was still some autonomy; however, repressive Russian policies led to waves of Crimean Tatar emigration to the Ottoman Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries to the tune of about 400,000 people.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the legacy of that autonomy continues through the present day, primarily due to Crimean Tatar historiography.

Language and religion also play large parts in Crimean Tatar national identity. Crimean Tatar is a Turkish language, with no close ties to Slavic languages, and, until the Crimean Tatars were removed, Crimean Tatar was an official language of the region. After adopting Islam in the 13th century and throughout the Ottoman period, the Crimean Tatars built hundreds of mosques and religious schools. While many of these structures have since been destroyed, Crimean Tatars still value their Islamic identity.

Crimean Tatar identity has a long history and many components, but, paradoxically, the connection to the land, the space, of Crimea as a homeland for Crimean Tatars was a product of Soviet national policies and really only cemented while the Crimean Tatars were in exile. Brian Williams stated that, “it was the Soviet state that completed the development of a secular Crimean Tatar national identity... and the construction of the Crimea as a homeland.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, this narrative has served the Crimean Tatars as they attempt to reclaim what was once just “our land.”

## HISTORY OF INTERACTION

Sasse’s *The Crimea Question* explores the idea that Crimea’s situation is a threefold “conflict that did not happen.”<sup>12</sup> The three avoided conflicts were between Russia and independent Ukraine; amongst the various ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups (including divisions within these groups); and the center-periphery relationship within Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> Sasse admits, however, that while these three conflicts were avoided, the issue of the Crimean Tatars has yet to be resolved.

10 Sasse, 75.

11 Quoted in Sasse, 75.

12 Sasse, 261.

13 Sasse, 261-2.

From the time the Tatars arrived on the peninsula in the 13th century they were the majority presence there until the arrival of the Russian Empire, which took possession of Crimea following the Russo-Turkish War.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned previously, Crimea quickly obtained a place in the myths and identity of Russia: Catherine the Great loved the mountains and beaches, Pushkin spent his “happiest minutes” there, emperors built palaces along the cliffs, and for wealthy Russians (and later, Soviet citizens) Crimea was the premier vacation spot of the Empire. Although the territory of Crimea was highly prized and contested, its inhabitants largely lived in a kind of peaceful coexistence.

One of the common myths to both Crimean Tatars and Crimean Russians is that of Crimea’s special status: although the land has been part of various empires and states, it has always held onto and prized its autonomy. As the Great War turned into the Revolution and then the Civil War, Crimea became the site of a four-way battle for control of the crucial geostrategic peninsula. As the Crimean Tatars sought to retain the level of autonomy that they and the territory enjoyed before the war, Ukrainian nationalists endeavored to incorporate Crimea into an independent Ukraine, the Bolsheviks tried to grab up as much land as they could, and White Russians hoped to transform Crimea into an anti-Bolshevik stronghold.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the war the Bolsheviks had won the territory and in 1921 established the Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) as part of the USSR. By decree of the Supreme Soviet, the official languages of the Crimean ASSR were Crimean Tatar and Russian (the importance of which continues to be a hot issue). This language policy was justified as, according to government documents, Crimean Tatars made up over a quarter of the population.<sup>16</sup>

The situation on the peninsula quickly soured over the next twenty five years. Crimea suffered two famines—one in 1922-3 and the Holodomor<sup>17</sup> of 1932-33—and was the site of many fierce and bloody battles in the Second World War. Even before the war had ended, Stalin in 1944 ordered the forced resettlement of the Crimean Tatars (and other non-Russians) primarily into Uzbekistan on allegations of colluding with the Nazis. It was not until 1967 that the Crimean Tatars’ Soviet citizenship was restored, but permanent relocation back to Crimea was impossible until the late 1980s. In the decades of the Crimean Tatars’ absence, Russians and Ukrainians seized the emptied land and property.

The cadaster was not the only thing changed, however. Many place names were changed, too, the old Tatar names replaced by Russian or Soviet ones, and Soviet historiography removed the Crimean Tatars from Crimean history in the aftermath of the deportation of 1944. Sasse states that “although some of the most blatant historical bias and error of Soviet-era historiography has been abandoned, the predominant post-Soviet perspective on Crimea remains Russocentric.... Popular history is void of references to the [largely fair] imperial policies

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14 The population table in Appendix 1 (Sasse, 275) begins in 1897, where Russians constituted the plurality, but not majority of the Crimean population.

15 Sasse, 84.

16 In Sasse, 275. The data for the table in her appendix is taken from *Naselenie Krymskoi oblasti po dannym perepisi (Simferopol, 1989)*.

17 Literally translated, Holodomor means “killing by hunger.” Recognized as a Soviet genocide by thirteen states.

***The removal of Crimean Tatar culture from Crimea—a period of about 45 years—indelibly transformed the idea of Crimea, namely, the notion of what was part of the imagined and shared history, and what was not.***

towards the Crimean Tatars.”<sup>18</sup> The removal of Crimean Tatar culture from Crimea—a period of about 45 years—indelibly transformed the idea of Crimea, namely, the notion of what was part of the imagined and shared history, and what was not.

In 1945, one year after the deportation, Soviet leadership demoted the Crimean ASSR to the status of an oblast, or province, of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), a much less autonomous administrative region in the Soviet structure. Nine years later Khrushchev transferred the Crimean oblast to the Ukrainian SSR on the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty, where in 1654 Ukrainian Cossack leader Bohdan Khmel’nyts’kyi negotiated a treaty with the Russian tsar, uniting the Ukrainian and Russian lands.<sup>19</sup> This act—called a “gift,” and always with quotation marks—remains at the center of Crimean separatists’ argument that the peninsula should not be a part of Ukraine. Six months prior to Ukraine’s independence, however, Crimea was reinstated as an ASSR, which only served to complicate the issue of autonomy, which is still a major problem in the Ukraine-Crimea dynamic.

When the Crimean Tatars began to return en masse in the 1990s, they were met with fierce opposition by the Crimean Russian majority in the ARC. The Crimean government did not recognize Crimean Tatars’ claims to land and property, and the Ukrainian government considered Crimean issues of secondary priority to the state-building process and was therefore of no help. As a result, many returning Crimean Tatars constructed crude new homes on undeveloped or abandoned property. While some of this population has since been able to procure official, legal housing, many Crimean Tatar families are still living illegally. This has evolved into both a major socio-economic problem and a political one. Having received little help from the local governments, the Mejlis and the Kurultay—representative bodies of the Crimean Tatars—have turned to Turkey and other sources for monetary aid in building not only homes, but also schools and mosques.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, the Crimean Tatar community, which now constitutes about 14% of the Crimean population,<sup>21</sup> has lobbied extensively to make Crimean Tatar an official language in the ARC, citing historical precedent, although these efforts have met with staunch resistance.

Religion, too, has caused tension between the Muslim Crimean Tatars and the Orthodox Crimean Russians. Each group accuses the other of discriminatory policies, speech, and actions, and even when concessions are made, they are usually in name only. For example, in 2011 the

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18 Sasse, 69.

19 Sasse, 9.

20 <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/politics/detail/98553/>

21 Ukrainian census.

Crimean government allocated land in Simferopol for the building of a central Crimean mosque. However, in 2004 this land had already been allocated for the exact same purpose, but was later annulled by Simferopol authorities.<sup>22</sup> Construction has not yet begun.

In various interviews over the past few months, Mejlis head and member of the Ukrainian parliament Mustafa Jemilev laid out many of the grievances of the Crimean Tatars.<sup>23</sup> He said that in the past 20 years of Ukraine's independence, of which Crimea has been a part, "there was nothing good about it for Crimean Tatars."<sup>24</sup> Beside more general issues like various politicians' maneuverings towards Russia, he also cites specific issues. He says that "there is not a single Tatar in [the Security Service of Ukraine] and not a single judge," and other Tatar officials in Crimea were being removed from their positions, in one case replaced by a deputy minister from the Donetsk oblast, not even in Crimea.<sup>25</sup> Political representation in Crimea is also an issue, as there is no current system of "quota-based representation of the indigenous population in the Crimean parliament." Because of the community's small numbers, Crimean Tatars have virtually no chance of being elected to the Crimean parliament.<sup>26</sup> This statement is corroborated by data from a Razumkov Center poll, showing that Crimean Tatar representation even in local governments the proportion of Crimean Tatar representation is substantially lower than the percentage of the Crimean Tatar population in those areas.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the Crimean Tatar population feels at a disadvantage and discriminated against. As these trends continue, the level of tension between the Crimean Tatars and Russians remains elevated. Such a high level of tension, however, cannot be sustained indefinitely: the tension must be resolved, either by peaceful resolution or by the eruption of violence.

## NEGOTIATING A PEACEFUL COMPROMISE

In many ways the current situation in Crimea is much like it was during the four-way battle of the late 1910s. While some of the players have changed, the narrative remains the same. The Crimean Tatars, returned from exile, seek greater autonomous powers, now from the Ukrainian state; Ukraine's central government in Kyiv recognizes the significance of the peninsula and does not want to lose it; Russian leaders such as former Moscow Mayor Luzhkov



Mustafa Abdülcemil Qırımoğlu, also known as Mustafa Jemilev, by Foto Tamer (Istanbul Crimean Tatar Association Archive) [CC-BY-SA-2.5 ([www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5](http://www.creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5))], via Wikimedia Commons

22 [http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all\\_news/other\\_confessions/islam/40741/](http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/other_confessions/islam/40741/)

23 <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20110203/162440136.html>; <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/politics/detail/98553/>

24 RIA Novosty interview.

25 Kyiv Post interview.

26 RIA Novosty interview.

27 NSD 109, 42-43.

have expressed their desire to see Crimea brought into the Russian Federation; and among much of the Russian population there still exists a feeling of separatism, that their future belongs with Russia and not Ukraine. The last twenty years, however, have evidenced that there is as yet no clear victor.

It is clear from recent history that, left to themselves, the Crimean Tatars and Crimean Russians will not be able to reach a compromise that satisfies each group's needs while maintaining distinct cultural identities. Therefore, it is up to a third party—in this case, Kyiv—to mediate between the groups. There are two major hurdles, however, in accomplishing this type of compromise: Crimean Russian separatism and Crimean Tatar socio-economic inequality and discrimination.

The rise of Crimean separatism reached its high point in the early 1990s but petered out after 1994 to only a general but latent feeling among the majority of the Crimean Russian population.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, a 2008 study revealed that Crimea's seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia was supported by 75.9% of Crimean Russians, 55.2% of Ukrainians in Crimea, and only 13.8% of Crimean Tatars. In contrast, 17.9%, 27.9%, and 28.3% of Crimean Russians, Ukrainians, and Crimean Tatars respectively responded that Crimea should stay a part of Ukraine, with the same rights and powers. Those numbers rise to 53.0%, 54.7%, and 57.6% respectively for Crimea's increased autonomy within the Ukrainian state.<sup>29</sup> These numbers demonstrate two trends: there is a definite difference of opinion along ethnic lines as to the question of Crimean secession, and that, while there is a strong feeling for separatism, over half of the Crimean population as a whole would support increased Crimean autonomy within Ukraine.

This second finding not only bodes well for Kyiv, but also provides the justification for the central Ukrainian government as a mediator between the Crimean Russians and Crimean Tatars. Indeed, Sasse contends that in the mid-1990s, when separatism was at its height, it was Kyiv's negotiating process with these two groups that prevented both the outbreak of violence and the secession of Crimea,<sup>30</sup> setting the precedent for Kyiv to lead this process.

Overcoming the socio-economic inequality and discrimination of the Crimean Tatars is a much larger obstacle, requiring concessions from all sides. The binary narratives of both groups have reduced their arguments to an unfortunate “us-or-them” mentality—unfortunate because it makes the process of compromise more difficult and more painful. Providing land, cultural, and socio-economic concessions and political reforms favorable to the Crimean Tatars undermines the constructed and indivisible<sup>31</sup> identity of the Crimean Russians, whether that be in profitable land, political power, or a de-Russification of the peninsula (for example, with place-names). For the Crimean Tatars, simply standing down to the group in power, relinquishing their lobbying efforts for language recognition, religious equality, and political representation will inevitably result in an eventual but utter decimation of the Crimean Tatar identity in Crimea.

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28 Sasse, 170.

29 NSD 104, 20.

30 Sasse, 8. This is a major premise of the book.

31 Smith, 76.

Obviously the Ukrainian government wants to see a stable Crimea. Because of Crimea's unique issues, it is the region of Ukraine with the greatest potential for conflict. In National Security and Defense, the Razumkov Center's magazine, the editors attest that, "in the conditions of political instability in the country lasting for years and serious foreign political challenges... the Crimean specificity, first of all, its socio-cultural, ethnic and confessional variety, make it especially vulnerable to internal conflicts. Given the special status of Crimea in Ukraine, such conflicts pose a potential threat to stability in Ukraine as a whole."<sup>32</sup> This fact is also evident to Moscow, where many Russian politicians—and indeed some Russian separatists in Crimea—would like to see an unstable Crimea, and therefore Ukraine, in order to increase Moscow's sphere of political influence. Here, Kyiv has already taken some steps: the Security Service of Ukraine has banned former Moscow mayor Luzhkov from Ukraine for threatening Ukraine's interests and territorial integrity.<sup>33</sup> That is not to say that Russian influence is the only motivator; politicians and businessmen alike have come under investigation for giving away or selling Crimean land on the cheap for personal gain.<sup>34</sup>

The long-term stability of Crimea and Ukraine lies primarily in the hands of Kyiv. Both Sasse and the editors of National Security and Defense recognize that the central government—both the presidential administrations and the Ukrainian parliament—has not done enough to normalize the relationship between the ARC and Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> There are already signs that Kyiv is moving in this direction. As recently as early April 2011, President Viktor Yanukovich signed bills into law that would increase the autonomy of Crimea,<sup>36</sup> and recent normative acts passed by Crimean Chairman Vasil' Dzharty seem to be addressing some of the Crimean Tatars' land concerns.<sup>37</sup> Prime Minister Azarov has stated that Kyiv is "ready for dialog with Crimean Tatars,"<sup>38</sup> but only time will tell if these actions alone are enough to effectively prevent conflict in Crimea. Without the mediation of the central Ukrainian government in Crimean affairs, the rising (or at least steady) tension will cause the situation to deteriorate.

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32 NSD 104, 2.

33 <http://en.rian.ru/world/20080512/107142320.html>

34 <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/nation/detail/96308/>

35 Sasse, 260-262. NSD issues 16, 102, 104.

36 <http://www.kyivpost.com/news/nation/detail/101835/>

37 <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/2313992.html>

38 <http://www.radiosvoboda.org/content/article/2313992.html>

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